

Browsing Room—Divisional Style

AN EARLY ARTICLE on the divisional plan library suggested the retention of a browsing room in such a library even though "the open-shelf divisional plan makes a browsing room less necessary than it is in most libraries."¹

The reasons advanced for such a browsing room were the accommodation of those who wished to smoke while they read and to permit readers "to roam around among a relatively small collection of new books."²

A further argument several months later maintained the same position on the browsing room, but more apologetically: "Its justification lies in the fact that it is a convenient place to keep small special collections which must be kept intact and in the fact that smoking is allowed there."³

New concepts take time to develop their own unique forms and to slough off the useless appendages of their progenitors. Thus the early automobile not only resembled an open carriage minus the horse, it even had a bracket for a buggy whip; and similarly the first movies confined themselves to sets like those of stage productions. Today it is easy to note such faults, and it is easy with 15 years of hindsight to point out the contradictions in these browsing-room arguments advanced in 1941.

¹ Ralph E. Ellsworth, "Colorado University's Divisional Reading Room Plan: Description and Evaluation," *COLLEGE AND RESEARCH LIBRARIES*, II (1941), 107.

² *Ibid.*

³ Ralph E. Ellsworth, "The Significance of the Divisional Room Plan for University Libraries," *University of Colorado Studies, General Series*, XXVI (1941), 39.

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To begin with, no browsing room should be the last sepulcher of "small special collections." In the traditional library the browsing room provides not only recreational reading in comfortable informal quarters; it serves also as an agent in creating a reading demand among the students apart from their classroom studies. Nothing is so deadly for these ends as Mr. Regent's "special collection" of numismatics uniformly bound in divinity calf, t.e.g., or Mr. Ex-professor's "small special collection" of the sources of something in Provençal and related languages. There is no theoretical problem involved here. However, the other questions do require a broader review of the theory of the divisional plan.

If the divisional library were simply a group of rooms housing three or four subjects each instead of the books of a single department—which is the fallacious view of some librarians—it could easily adapt a browsing room to its own purposes. The divisional library is much more than a group of open shelf rooms. It would take a monograph to explain fully the divisional library. For our present purposes, we may risk oversimplification and utilize a brief description of the divisional feature under discussion.

The divisional plan library, in its reading room aspect, is an open-shelf arrangement of books organized by the large related subject areas of man's knowledge in an effort to provide the student with an intelligible presentation of the *relationship of all the disciplines on campus*. It is an effort to have the books of a university pass on the knowledge that a modern university wants to communicate to its student body. The divisions them-

selves are merely workable horizons of control and service.

Such an arrangement gives a student direct access to the shelves that are stocked with all the books in demand, plus those of cognate interest as well as an array of lighter or recreational reading within the subject.

To set up a browsing room in such a situation would necessitate the separation of the lighter or more interesting books from their subjects. Such an action would in effect inhibit browsing in the subjects and reduce the possibility of leading an interest in light reading in a subject to deeper study within the field, a marked objective of the divisional library.

The separate housing of recent acquisitions to allow readers "to roam around among a relatively small collection of new books" would have an exactly similar effect. Instead of allowing the freshness and attraction of the bright new book to create a demand within its subject, this freshness would in a sense be wasted with no transfer of interest from the new book to others in the field adjacent to it.

The divisional plan library has more than a casual interest in subject relationships, it is a subject-relationship library. Unique situations will demand their own solutions and may effect some modification of the basic theory, but for general practice the browsing room in its conventional form has no place in the divisional library. It would not only negate a major aspect of such a library, but it is also redundant, for the worth-while "book characteristics" of the browsing room are inherent in the open-shelf organization of the divisional library.

But what of the other worth-while browsing room features: the smoking, the lounge chairs, the informal reading corner? We must recognize the fact that there are arguments against duplicating and triplicating such services, which is the case on campuses with student union

and dormitory libraries. However, accepting the majority view that such features are desirable,⁴ there are several ways in which they may be incorporated into the divisional reading areas.

Space and ventilation permitting, every reading area might have a corner furnished with easy chairs and ash trays, a "smoking permitted here" corner. Such a section is likely to grow in popularity. Weighing this fact against the need for chair and desk study as well as the accommodation of non-smokers, the librarian may well allow such a corner to develop to its own level.

If such space is not available in the reading areas, corridors, lobbies and other applicable areas bordering on the reading rooms may be furnished for recreational reading and smoking (subject to fire regulations).

A third method is in effect at the University of Nebraska. A section of the humanities division has a physical partition that is disregarded for purposes of subject organization. The shelving is arranged so that all the volumes of American literature fall into this section, and this area is furnished informally with lounge chairs, lamps and sofas. With a very slight additional emphasis on recreational reading in this area of American literature, Nebraska has, in one, a full complement of the divisional library and a room to absorb whatever slight residual browsing needs the open-shelf areas do not fully satisfy.

Further accommodations for reading and lounging are provided at Nebraska in an unsupervised study hall. Here, in a place designed primarily for study, smoking is permitted throughout the hall, and lounge chairs are provided at one end.

Breaking down a conventional browsing room into its "book characteristics" and its "room characteristics" overlooks

⁴ Sister M. R. Vahey, "1948 Survey of Browsing Rooms," *Catholic Library World*, XX (1949), 242-46.

the fact that it is a combination of the two in the traditional library that makes for a successful browsing room. This breakdown was merely a point of departure and not an argument that open shelves alone, even if they include recreational reading matter, make for a good browsing room. The same would be true of an informal, comfortably furnished library room without such books. However, the proposals advanced take note of this fact. Certainly the practice at Nebraska, with the open shelving of recreational books and the provisions for lounge reading and smoking in addition to the American literature area combining these forms, adapts the best qualities of the browsing room to the new needs of the divisional plan library.

There is a third set of factors operative in a good browsing situation and these might be defined as the "service characteristics." They have been described as liberal operating rules, circulation of the materials, long hours of service, integration with the curriculum, sponsored extracurricular activities, faculty coop-

eration, and full-time trained attendants.⁵

In every one of these areas, with the possible exception of sponsored extracurricular activities, the browsing aspects of the divisional library receive superior service. For with integration into their subject areas the books are available during the full schedule of library operation. The faculty not only assists in the book selection, but makes the student aware of these peripheral materials such as historical novels, mathematical riddles and conundrums in language. The books are under the guidance of full-time professional librarians, who really care whether the browsing room, rather than the library as a unit, sponsors an exhibition or a musicale.

Thus, whether we evaluate from the book, room, or service characteristics, we may note that the divisional library, without creating a separate conventional browsing room, which would in part impair its integrity, can offer to its community all the pleasures and rewards of relaxed reading and browsing.

⁵ *Ibid.*, and A. Beatrice Young, "The Recreational Reading Room," *Journal of Higher Education*, XIII (1942), 434-37.

Corrections to ACRL Organization Manual

ACRL Organization Manual manuscript was approved by the Committee on Publications and final revisions completed by the Chairman of the Committee on Constitution and Bylaws about the time of the Philadelphia Conference. The manuscript as printed should have incorporated a revised statement of purpose of the Publications Committee which was accepted but not formally approved by the Board of Directors in July 1955. This reads:

"(1) To serve as the policy-formulating body for ACRL publications, and as such

to serve in this field as liaison between ACRL and other organizations; (2) to stimulate and to promote research activities useful to the further development of college, university and reference libraries; (3) to encourage the production and distribution of worthy publications derived from these and other productive activities."

Inadvertently excluded from the list of committees was the important Committee on Foundation Projects. No precise statement of its function and responsibility has been formulated.